

REVEALING CONTRADICTION

A CREATIVE PROJECT

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MASTER OF ARTS

BY

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# Problem

I was born and raised on the southern shore of Lake Michigan in Gary, Indiana. Gary is a place where the incredible beauty and biodiversity of the Indiana Dunes intertwines with one of the most industrialized areas in the United States. This conflict has played a large role in defining me as a person and has steadily provided content for my work over the last 8 years. In myself, I see this conflict played out in a love of both natural and manmade materials and a respect for the beauty of both nature and industry. While I am an advocate for responsible consumption in the name of the environment, I am not immune to the temptations of consumerism. How can I make work that helps me to understand this conflict within myself and society at large?

I believe that art can be a powerful tool and platform for the spread of information and for helping change people's perception about issues. I am interested in art as an open platform for experimentation in an environment that is unencumbered by bureaucracies. How can I create an accessible body of work that allows the viewer to think about the issues that are important to everyone? How can I do this while creating works that reflect my personal life and experiences and depict places that are important to me?

I try to be environmentally conscientious. At no time, in my life, have I made a conscious choice to harm the environment. Yet, the life that I lead is dependent on the destruction of the environment, whether it is through my cell phone using electricity or my furnace heating my apartment. In this sense, no choice that I make is based completely on logic. By trying to

understand my emotional self, I believe that I can start to make more logical decisions on how to create a sustainable art process. How can I create an art process for myself that helps me to live a more sustainable life? How can I start to flesh out some of the contradiction that can allow me to start this process?

# Influences

I strongly believe in the importance of studying and understanding the history of art as a way to understand the context of my work. Many of my works contain references to art history. My influences are vast and range from ancient to contemporary art. It is important to me to try to understand the reasons that humans have been compelled to make “art” in every culture since the first civilizations. I view art making as a method of understanding the similarities between myself and other people as a way to gain an understanding of my instincts.

I am fascinated by history and I enjoy the process of learning about the culture and the time in which a work of art was created. I see art making as an inner-necessity. As such, I am interested in learning about individual artists, their practice, their obsessions, their daily schedules, and their early lives as a way to gain insight into what makes a person want to create art in a world where art is generally not lucrative and the artist is often seen as an outcast. I can be drawn to a piece of art for many different reasons. I can find influence in the formal, visual, conceptual, or historical aspects of an artwork. Sometimes something will influence specific bodies or pieces of work and sometimes it will influence my artistic temperament.

My work is broken into a body of woodcuts and a body of mixed-media Garbage Pieces (fig 1-3). These two bodies of work are influenced by different artists and ideas within art history but also share many influences. I have traveled to Italy three times and have learned about the Italian Renaissance and the artists involved. Since this time, characteristics of this movement have intertwined themselves with my work. I am drawn to the architectural scale that creates the mood of the work of the Renaissance. I am interested in the way that the Art of the Renaissance often interacts with the architecture and blurs the line between the two. I am interested in how cities such as Florence were able to create cultures where life and art interact more often by incorporating art into public spaces. My Dead Fish Frieze (fig. 4) is indebted to the ornately patterned architectural friezes in Renaissance churches.

Many of my woodcuts including This is not a Peace Pipe(fig. 5) and Easterly's Pile(fig. 6) depict ritualistic ceremonies as in Raphael's Consignment of the Keys or Perugino's Marriage of the Virgin or as in an annunciation painting. In a proof of Easterly's Pile, I depicted angels hovering above the ceremony but ultimately edited them out to simplify the composition. The simplicity of form that characterizes my woodcuts is strongly influenced by my study of Early Renaissance artists such as Giotto and Fra Angelico and my exposure to Etruscan ruins that dot the countryside of Tuscany.

My woodcuts fit into a tradition that is many centuries old. Formally, this work is influenced by the black and white woodcuts of Shiko Munakata, Paul Gauguin, many of the German Expressionists such as Ernst Ludwig Ernst Kirchner and Erich Heckel and the contemporary woodcuts of Naoko Matsubara.

My woodcuts are created by composing my vocabulary of symbols into different compositions where certain symbols are emphasized by creating focal points. I relate the more active areas of my woodcuts such as groupings of buildings and cities to the Mesopotamian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphs that I have spent many hours studying at the Oriental Institute in Chicago. I am interested in the ability of symbols, like language, to transfer information efficiently. This has much precedent in art history. The way that I compose symbols to create a landscape is influenced by my study of American Folk Art, Joan Miro, Paul Klee and Roger Brown.

My work has been described as naïve. While it certainly uses the approachable style of folk and naïve art as a way to connect to the viewer, the ideas, messages and information that this body of work conveys are not naïve. They confront many harsh truths of life and act to inform the viewer of reality.

While I have done many black and white woodcuts that focus on the contentious relationship between humans and the environment, the woodcuts in this body are the first ones that I have made that depict specific instances of environmental damage at the hands of humans. The direct political nature of the woodcuts has been influenced by artists such as Honore Daumier, Francisco Goya and Sue Coe, who all made prints relating to social justice. These artists elevate victims and often under represented people in their art. While I do not generally elevate people in my work, I do elevate garbage and nature. That being said, it is very important to me that my work addresses the troubles and needs that exist in my home of Gary, Indiana and also that this work is accessible to all people. I appreciate these artists to have represented the problems of the lower classes in a time when that was unpopular and possibly even dangerous.

Francisco Goya, who was working around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was ahead of his time and made art that spoke out against the social injustices that plagued society. Goya was a painter and printmaker and in bodies of prints called The Caprichos and The Disasters of War Goya criticizes royalty, clergy and bourgeoisie, and human cruelty as he depicts many of the most horrible moments of war. Goya began his artistic career as a court painter to the Spanish Crown and the contradiction that defines his approach to art is of great interest as I try to understand my own contradictory impulses. Goya's biography has had a great effect on the way that I perceive him. Knowing that Goya feared arrest for the images that he made has liberated me to speak my mind more freely in the realization that the freedom that I have to express myself is not inherent. The stark and concise nature of his visual language has encouraged me to me present harsh facts through the necessary information.

Honore Daumier blurred the line between art and life by changing the way that people interacted with art. His main body of work consists of thousands of lithographs that were originally published in magazines. Instead of only observing art in a cathedral or in off limit places like the palace, his art was available to nearly everyone in their home. Daumier used print media as a method for mass communication to an audience that was not necessarily educated in art. His subject matter was social satire that ridiculed royalty, and the bourgeoisie. I am also inspired by the way that he used humor and sarcasm as a way to make his work accessible.

Several years ago, I was lucky enough to meet Sue Coe at Ball State University. She is a painter and printmaker whose main focus is depicting atrocities that she believes that people should know about. It is not just her artwork, but her intense passion for the political issues such as animal rights and the rights of the oppressed, that I find remarkable. She makes it a point to make work that is accessible to almost anyone. Even though she has paintings in the

Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, her prints are still available for twenty-five dollars. I am interested in this model for accessibility.

My Garbage Pieces were influenced by much different references. They refer to color field painting and to the minimalism of Tony Smith and Barnett Newman. However, the fact that there is no visual rest within the heavy textures created with thousands of three-dimensional objects separates this work from minimalism.. They also refer to the Abstract Expressionism of Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock. I am interested in the similarities between “randomness” that is involved in making an automatic drawing and the “randomness” with which the line is created by the hose.

While I am interested in the possibilities of color field painting, I have to admit that I quickly get bored with the flat, purist painting that was championed by the Late Modernist Critic Clement Greenberg. I made these pieces because I saw great potential within color field that I wanted to explore. Many of the Abstract expressionists were interested in formal purity and the separation of life from painting. Considering my situation, I would find this approach irresponsible. My garbage pieces are made with non-traditional materials and are made to oppose the sanctity of traditional materials such as paint, marble or bronze. I describe this piece as a comment on Greenbergian formalism that was played out in the purity of Abstract Expressionist painting. This work is also influenced by Dubuffet who explored heavy textures by adding objects. I consider the objects in the foreground it to be placed there in a Duchampian tradition. The broken vacuum in Garbage Piece #1 refers specifically to Jeff Koons vacuum pieces. While Jeff Koons describes his vacuum pieces as being in a Duchampian tradition, I wish my work to function in opposition to the sterility of Jeff Koons.



My art is influenced by other art but it is also influenced by my experiences. The landscapes that I create from memory are some of the ones that I am most familiar with. While my landscapes usually depict places in or near where I grew up in Gary, some refer to places that I have been in my travels. For the last thirteen years, I have worked in the construction of commercial playgrounds; this job has taken me to twenty-five states. I have worked in a great diversity of natural and cultural environments including Guam in the Philippines Sea and the Hualapai Indian Reservation on the south rim of the Grand Canyon. It has taken me to Hasidic Jewish Communes in the Catskills of New York, the ninth ward of New Orleans, and Fort Bragg in North Carolina. I was touched by the people that I met and overwhelmed by the positive energy that is created by building playgrounds in every place that I went. I am interested in the way that art shares this ability to transfer positive energy. I am also interested in playgrounds and parks as a social meeting spot as I am interested in art that serves this function. As I met many interesting people, I heard many interesting stories. While, I have not yet made work based on any of these stories, this body of work is the first that I have made that contains specific narratives.

An aspect of building playgrounds that I found disturbing was the amount of trash that gets thrown out during the process. On one single job we threw out a construction dumpster worth of garbage and over 100 pallets. Seeing this waste served to further reinforce my awareness of environmental destruction that had been cultivated while growing up in an Industrial city.

In my travels, as the scenery changed, one thing remained the same. From the garbage dump in the village of Supai in the Grand Canyon to the streets of Naples, Italy to a Hasidic

Jewish commune in The Catskill Mountains of New, there is garbage and environmental destruction everywhere.

## Description of Artwork

### This is not a Peace Pipe

This is not a Peace Pipe is the first of the three large scale artist books that I created. It is a one foot by ten foot continuous narrative landscape print that is folded accordion style. It begins with the image of the peaceful ceremony where Father Marquette is smoking a peace pipe with the Iliniwek Indians. The Hand of God produces radiating lines surrounding the ceremony. As the print moves from left to right, the Calumet River flows alongside the curving outlines of dunes with Lake Michigan in the background. As the text on the top of the book describes, the river named after the peace pipe that Father Marquette smoked with the Iliniwek Indians flows through the pristine Indiana dunes and then as it enters an area of heavy industry, it disappears into a pipe. Where the river enters the pipe, I included three canoes of disappointed people.

This artist book recreates an experience that I have had many times as this location is a place where I have kayaked many times. The first time that my friends and I went on this short journey, we thought that the river was navigable to Lake Michigan but we found out that its flow is disrupted by a pipe. This river was that was named after a pipe, now, becomes one.

The Ball State University printmaking program encourages students to make printmaking books. This notion was exciting to me because bookmaking seemed like a good way to integrate my printmaking and sculptural interests and because I love books. However, I was initially unsure as to how books would fit into the ideas that I would be working with. As I was trying to work out the format for the print that became the book This is not a Peace Pipe, David Johnson suggested that what I was describing would make a good book. The process of making that book allowed me to develop ideas that seemed to complement a book format especially landscape prints (of which I have made many).

Books are customarily a vehicle for the transfer of important information. The history of relief printing is intertwined with the history of bookmaking. As well as being a vehicle for transferring information, books are traditionally tied to narrative and storytelling. Before making books, I had never really worked with narrative. I learned through these projects that I love the dimension that a narrative can give to a piece. I have created many landscapes but now understand how a long horizontal or vertical book can give life to a landscape and is conducive to forcing the eye of the viewer to a desired point in the composition.

### White Sands, New Mexico

White Sands, New Mexico is a place of incredible natural beauty. The shimmering white gypsum sand changes color dramatically as the sun moves throughout the sky. White Sands is also the home of White Sands Missile Range and the Trinity site where they tested the first atomic bomb. After learning about this history during several visits to White Sands, I felt the need to convey this story. White Sands, New Mexico (fig. 7) is a print that I made that was

originally intended to be a book. The print is eighteen inches by seventy two inches in a long landscape format. The print shows two suns and a moon. In many of my black and white works I include both the sun and the moon. This is a way to connote the passing of time and highlight the cyclical nature of things. This print was an attempt to reproduce the format of my first book; This is not a Peace Pipe which also contains imagery that is active on the ends and calm in the middle. Like This Is Not a Peace Pipe and Demand Sand from Indiana, this work depicts a journey and represents my own personal journey. While it did not work as an artist book, it does work as a landscape print.

### Easterly's Pile

Easterly's Pile is a two foot by ten foot artist book in the format of a Christian altarpiece. The central image depicts a swearing in ceremony in front of a pile of toxic waste where a kneeling figure in a suit is touching a bible that is being held out by a man wearing a robe. Both men are wearing three cones on their heads; one on the head like a dunce, one on their nose like a beak, and one on their chin like a beard. This image originated from an etching that I created that depicted two figures that I thought would blend seamlessly into Goya's Caprichos. The words at the bottom read "Indiana's head of the Environmental Protection Agency takes his oath of office in front of the 33 acre of Pile of toxic waste that he dumped on the shores of Lake Michigan."

The image is nearly symmetrical and radiates from the central image of the ceremony of the oath of office. The image on both ends of the composition is one of a factory with cathedral windows. The image between the two factories is one of a dune landscape that is similar to

ones in This is not a Peace Pipe and White Sands, New Mexico (fig. 8). The landscape goes back and forth between natural and industrial with a railroad track connecting it.

I made this artist book because I believe that it is a great tragedy of hypocrisy that the state of Indiana would appoint a person with a terrible environmental record to lead the state agency that is in charge of protecting it. This is one example of a systemic problem with the ways in which we deal with environmental issues.

### Demand Sand from Indiana

The last artist book that I created, Demand Sand from Indiana (fig. 8) is a two foot by eight foot vertical book that is based on a story that I have heard many times since I was a small child. It is constructed around the historical fact that Indiana's largest Sand Dune, "The Hoosier Slide" was removed over the period of 30 years and transported to Muncie, Indiana to make glass jars. At the top of the print towers the sand dune which is delineated by a 2 inch thick line. Lines of trucks funnel down to the train tracks that transport the sand through the zebra striped agricultural fields to Muncie. As in many of my previous prints, railroad tracks form the central axis of the print and draw the eye of the viewer through the image. The tracks then combine, at the bottom, with a big black shape to create a large arrow that helps the viewer to move through the image and the text. As in This is not a Peace Pipe and White Sands, New Mexico, this book reflects my own personal journey from the sand dunes of The Calumet Region of Indiana southeast to Muncie. This print follows the smaller print that I made called Demand Sand from White Sands, New Mexico.

This journey, like the ones in some of my other books reflects my personal journey as I grew up in the Indiana Dunes and moved to Muncie to attend Ball State University. I find it interesting that the chances are that I probably never would have come here if the sand had not.

### Dead Fish Frieze

I felt compelled to make the Dead Fish Frieze when I discovered the fact that Department of Natural Resources Officials dumped 2000 gallons of fish poison in the Calumet River. It was created by printing a one foot by six foot black and white woodcut multiple times and connecting them at the ends to make a long horizontal frieze. The print can be printed as many times as necessary. For a couple years before I made this piece, I was interested in creating works that repeated an image many times as a way to utilize this ability of printmaking. I specifically thought that this method could be useful for creating an architectural frieze like the ones in cathedrals in Italy. I am also interested in the fact that this work interacts with the other works in the gallery. The experience of visiting Italian Cathedrals is an experience in which the viewer is completely immersed in art. The cathedrals provide visual and sensual stimulation in every square inch of the space. This intricate attention to detail and tendency to surround and overwhelm the viewer has influenced much of my art since 2005.

This work is one of many that are made of individual pieces that connect to each other to form a larger image. I see many of my works, including the Garbage Pieces, as modular, and think of the individual pieces as building blocks or tiles that can be connected to each other in different ways to compose different images.

## The Garbage Pieces

I am interested in a variety of approaches and find it important to be changing constantly as an artist. In this effort, I have found myself taking illogical steps to provide myself with something to react against. I will do something that I am not completely passionate about in an attempt to learn what I am passionate about. I have been working with trash for many years and this project started by creating intuitive collages for the simple purpose of creating collages. This work began with imagery but quickly became more about the textures of the fabric and cardboard that I was gluing down.

As an artist, I have always been interested in materials and their properties. Working with garbage is interesting to me because it involves working with nearly all materials, as pretty much everything becomes garbage. This work embraces the consumer side of me but also counteracts the materialistic implications of consumerism by acting as a vehicle to recycle my garbage.

I see The Garbage Pieces as one work that consists of an ever growing number of twenty-two by thirty inch modular garbage tiles that are either painted black or white and larger objects that can be recomposed into many different pieces. So far I have made three pieces that range from twelve to twenty-one tiles. The Garbage pieces are constructed using acrylic medium and gesso to glue many layers of recycled material such paper scraps, hoses, shoes, wires, Mardi Gras beads, woodchips, the contents of the shop vacuum to used printmaking paper, cardboard or canvas. The first thing I do is to glue down scraps of fabric with acrylic medium to the paper to reinforce it. Then I take scraps of fabric and wrap them around larger objects such as shoes and to connect them to paper. After connecting the larger objects, I mix



paper scraps, woodchips, peat moss, and string together in buckets to create a mortar which I use to fill the crevasses. Then I place heavy books on the top to act as weights and compress the material to insure a solid bond. After everything is set, I paint it again with gesso to reinforce the bonds. In some places, I sprinkle peat moss over the top of the wet gesso and then gesso it again when it is dry. This is a way of further reinforcing the piece. After they are finished, the tiles end up being up to six inches thick.

I am interested in making art with garbage because I feel compelled to search for ways to reduce my ecological footprint. Although not all the garbage in these pieces is mine, most of it is. The objects that are not mine are items that I have thrown away in the past and represent the mountain of waste that I have been responsible for in my life.

This project involves self-assessment as I am forced to examine every object that I incorporate. These pieces then act as a confession where I display the garbage for a public audience. My goal is to have a sustainable art practice. While not every part of my project is sustainable if I can do more good than bad, the end result is positive for the environment. Hikers often go by the rule that if you accidentally drop a piece of litter on a trail then pick up several and you still will have a positive effect on the environment.

My goal was to make the Garbage Pieces elegant, as a way to initially engage the viewer and encourage further examination. I want people to look at the objects that I have pasted down and think of their own consumer habits. At this point, I am uninterested in assigning any symbolism to any specific piece of trash. However, I am interested trash as a symbol of wastefulness and consumerism. I am interested in attempting to eliminate any hierarchy within the objects to highlight the fact that everything eventually becomes garbage. I have created a

paradox by placing an object in the foreground and making it more prominent than the other pieces of garbage. However, the thoughtlessness with which I have chosen the objects for foreground leave little room for the viewer to find meaning in these objects and thus reduce that object to the place of every other piece of garbage.

I have worked with many materials and I am interested in blurring the lines between sculpture, painting, collage and assemblage. I see these lines as limiting and I am interested in creating art with the material that most suit my ideas.

## Conclusion

I have learned much by working with two bodies of work at the same time. Through this period of intense working, I was able to learn many things about myself and my sensibilities through the similarities and differences in the projects.

The differences between the two projects act to highlight two different sides of my personality. The woodcuts demand intense planning while the garbage pieces mostly involve the physical labor of gluing objects to the surface. Some of these differences that I have found in my sensibilities relate back to my childhood in Gary, Indiana. I look at the woodcuts as trying to understand nature and the garbage pieces as trying to understand man.

This work has highlighted points of contradiction in my own life. In The Garbage Pieces, I used about 20 gallons of acrylic medium and Gesso which is not environmentally sustainable. In the future, I am interested in finding a more environmentally friendly way of making similar pieces, such as sewing or tying together similarly colored pieces of garbage.

As I have been trying to understand the inherent nature of contradictory impulses in all people, I have found that contradiction is not always a bad thing. Sometimes contradictory impulses within a person can instigate a certain dynamic to an artwork and also make the work accessible to a larger variety of people. My work often involves the opposing impulses of funny and dark, naïve and educated. A point of contradiction that I believe makes my work stronger is that some aspects of my art are very controlled while some are very primal and instinctual. When I make a woodcut, the original drawing is very loose. This creates more work during the intricate cutting process, but results in fluid looking forms and marks in the finished work.

While the two bodies of work seem very different, there are many similarities between the two projects that have highlighted important parts of my sensibilities as an artist. While I

have a large vocabulary of techniques and materials that I have worked with, both projects gravitate towards simple techniques which I tend to force my will upon.

Both projects consist of works with active, black and white surfaces that appear different from a distance than they do from close up and encourage the viewer to come closer to examine the detail. Both bodies are composed in a similar manner where I insert the larger and more prominent symbols or objects first, and then fill in the rest with abstract textures. Both bodies of work exist in the “gray” area between abstraction and realism. In the garbage pieces I combine real objects to create non-objective forms. When the individual objects get painted black, most of them lose their identities and become abstract forms and textures. In the woodcuts, I use abstraction to depict “very real” subject matter.

The time commitment for each piece that I make is great. Many of my pieces took a full month of eight hour days, seven days a week to complete. I learned that I appreciate the complexities that each piece has when I create a few ambitious pieces as opposed to many smaller ones

Throughout the process of making this body of work the question of, “Who I am addressing with my work?” often arose in my mind. This question again serves to highlight a contradiction within my approach to art making. I am interested in making work for a diverse audience. While it is important for me to make work that is visually and conceptually accessible to people who do not have a substantial knowledge of art theory and practice, there are also elements of my work that require a knowledge of art or art history in order to fully appreciate such as a reference to Rene Magritte’s The Treachery of Images in the title of This is not a Peace Pipe, or even the implications of the fact that I work with the process of woodcut.

As I made these two bodies of work I was forced to confront the fact that the garbage pieces do not have the same autographic qualities as my woodcuts as there are no marks in them that show the hand of the artist. I am interested in honesty within my art. As such, I am interested in my art showing that I am unique but also that certain aspects of me are not unique, such as many of the products that I consume. I am attracted to the universal qualities of garbage. I generally refer to the differences between the woodcuts and the garbage pieces as the difference between autograph and autobiography. As the viewer examines the objects within the garbage pieces, they can start to put together information about me and my habits and create narratives based on the objects they see.

So where do I go from here and how can I apply the knowledge that I gained from creating this work? I see my art making process as creating logical or illogical steps towards my next piece. I see each piece as an evolution of previous ones. One of the last woodcuts that I created depicted a giant pile of toxic waste. As a way to further connect the ideas that I am working with in sculpture and printmaking, I am planning an artist book that will be based on garbage piles throughout Northwest Indiana. This work has opened up a lot of possibilities. One of my primary interests is in finding ways to make this work environmentally sustainable.

In this work, I have not yet been able to address issues of accessibility. As part of my learning process I will be volunteering in a city-wide project organized by the mayor of the post-industrial city of Braddock, Pennsylvania. I will be working with the Transformazium Artist Collective in their efforts to revitalize this city through public art projects. In the future, I hope to combine my knowledge to create an art process for myself that provokes personal growth and works towards a socially responsible art practice.



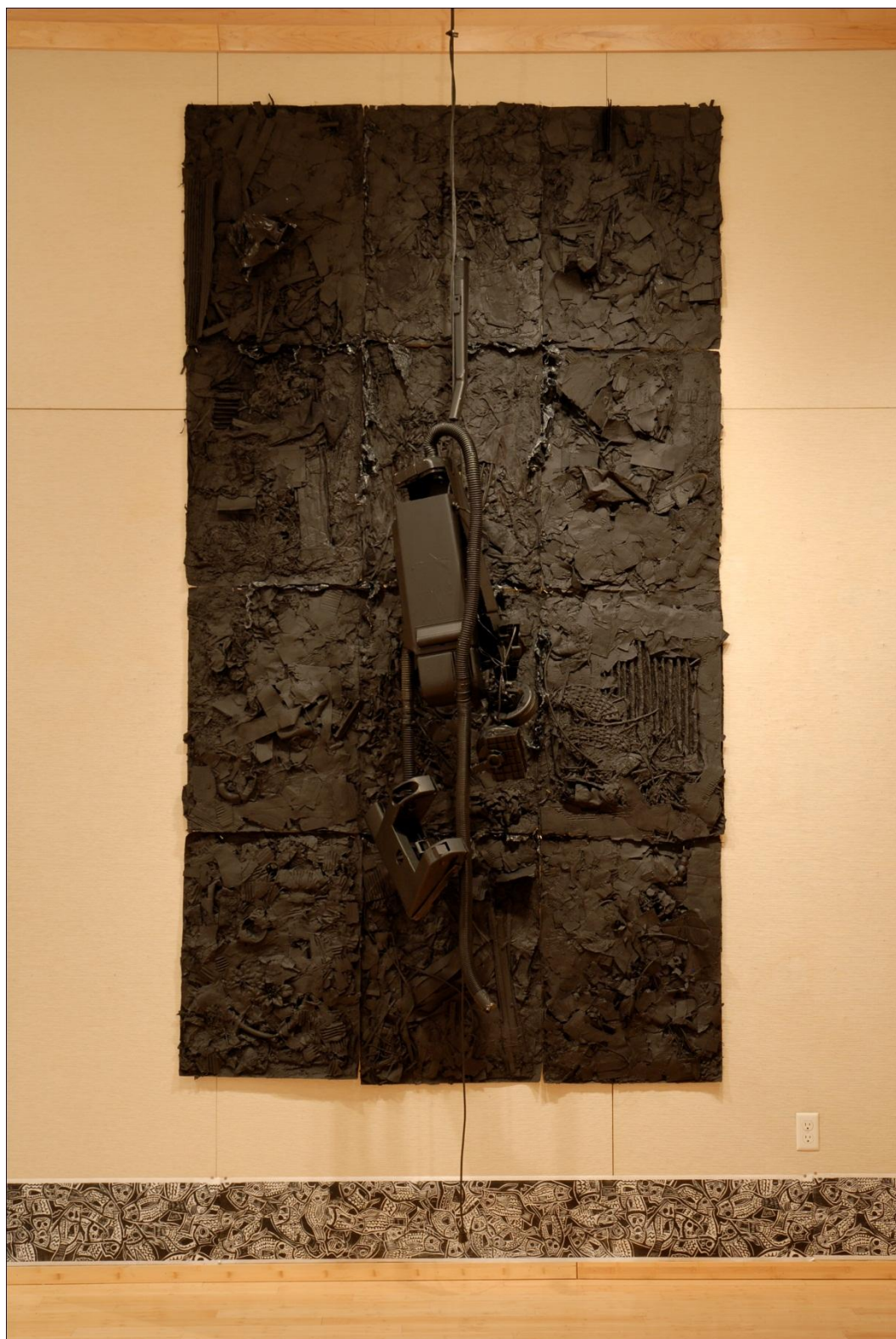


Figure 1, Garbage Piece #1, garbage, gesso, paper, 66" X 120"



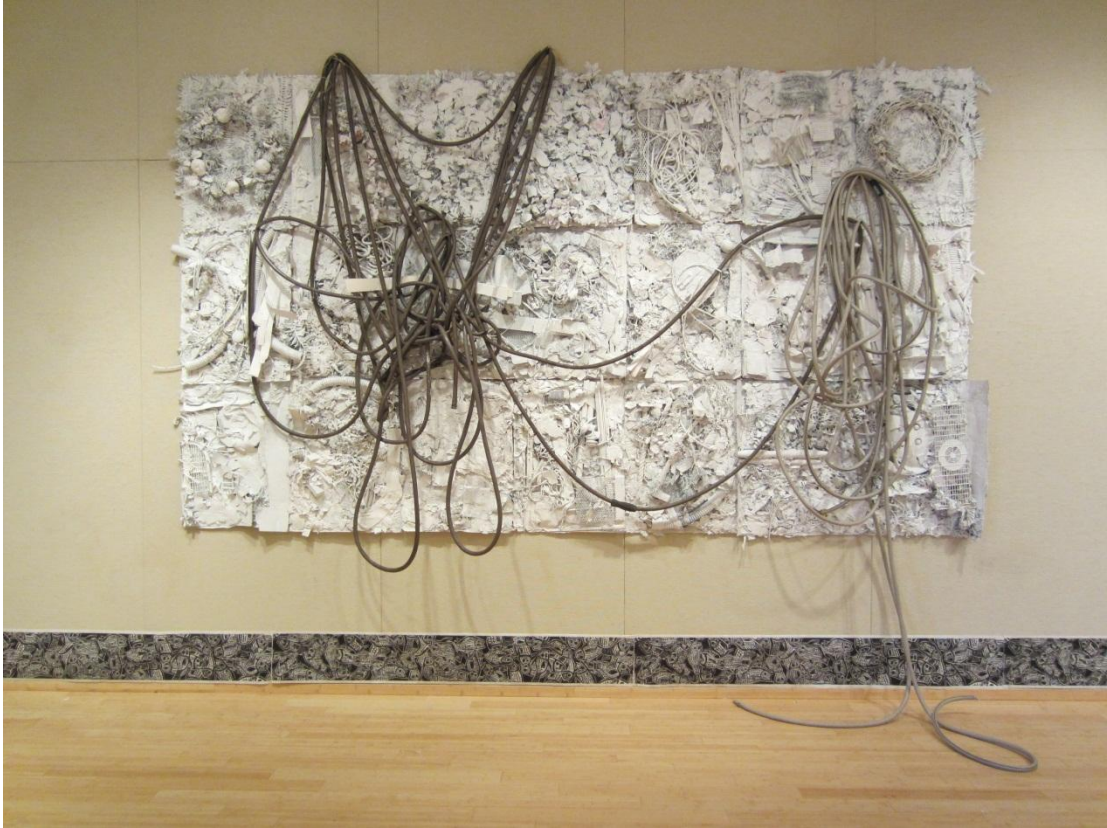


Figure 2, Garbage Piece #2, garbage, gesso, paper, 90" X 154"



Figure 3, Garbage Piece #3, garbage, gesso, paper, 60" X 148"





Figure 4, Dead Fish Frieze- (Detail), woodcut, Dimensions Variable



Figure 5, This is not a Peace Pipe, woodcut book, 12" X 120"



Figure 6, Easterly's Pile, Artist Book, 24"x48"

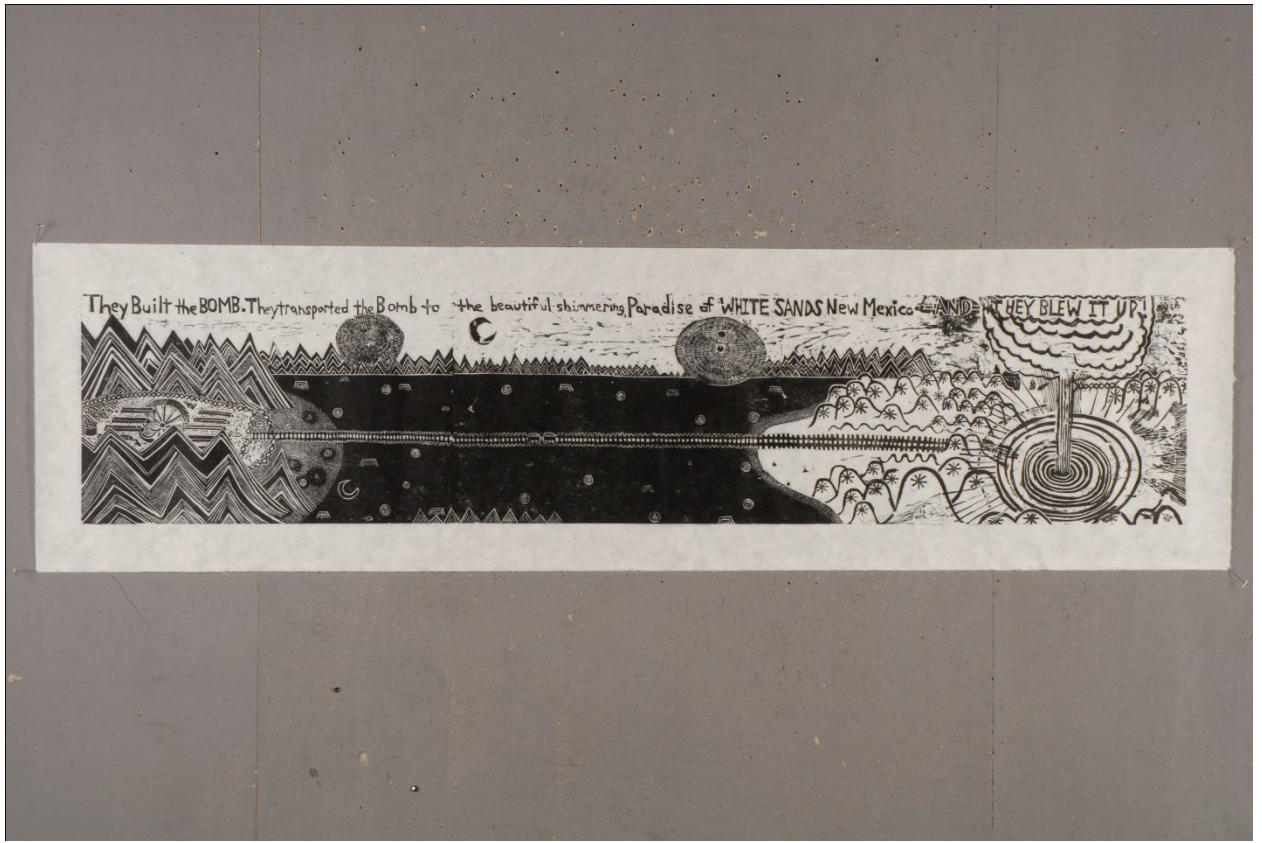


Figure 7, White Sands, New Mexico, Woodcut, 18" X72"



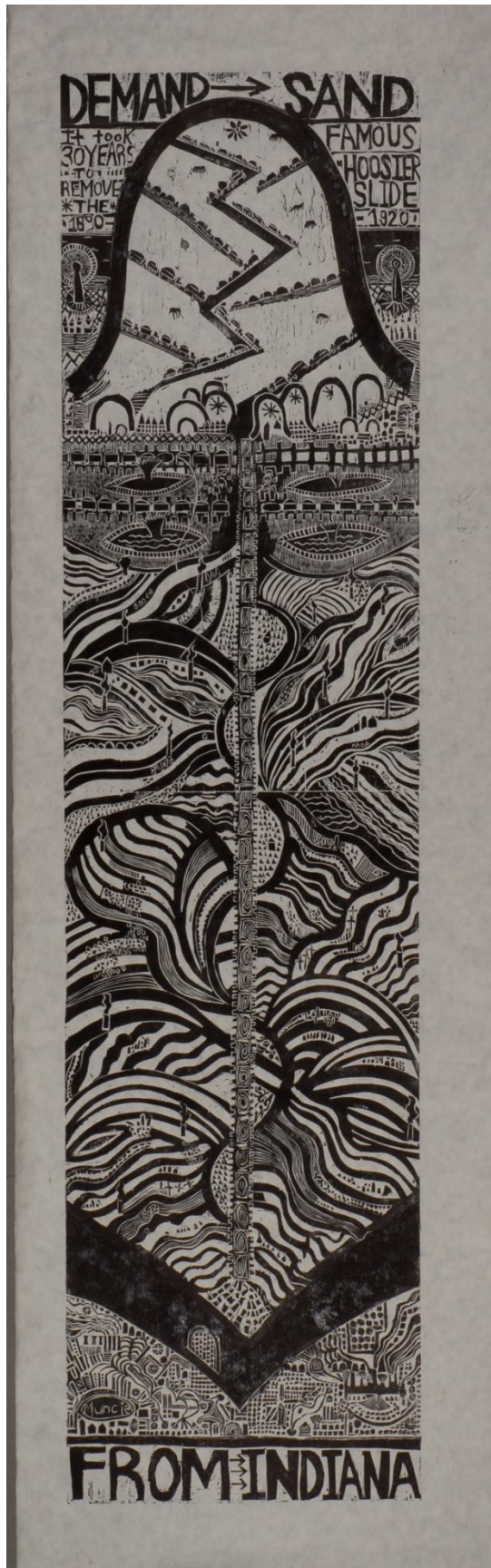


Figure 8, Demand Sand from Indiana, Artist Book,

24"X 96"



